

Love Your Enemies: It is the Way of the Jesus

Matthew 5:43-48

Introduction: 1) Returning evil for good is satanic. Returning good for good is simply human. Returning good for evil, now that is divine! That is certainly the perspective of the Word of God and our Lord. Matthew 5:43-48 contains the 6th and final antithesis in the Sermon on the Mount that began at 5:21. They inform us of the kind of righteousness that supernaturally flows from the poor in spirit (5:3), the meek (5:5), the merciful (5:7) and the pure in heart (5:8). It is a righteousness that supernaturally emerges from within citizens of the Kingdom of God who are the salt of the earth and the light of the world (5:13-16), citizens who are on the way to being perfect as their heavenly Father is perfect (5:48). All of this is a work of divine grace not human effort. This especially becomes evident when responding to the command to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute you (5:44). After all, the attitude of the world is well expressed by W. H. Auden in a poem entitled, "September 1, 1939," when he writes:

"I and the public know
What all school children learn,
Those to whom evil is done
Do evil in return."

(Quoted in Scott Simon, "A Meditation on Evil," 4-8-17, NPR)

2) Grant Osborne is quite helpful in laying a foundation for our study of these six verses. He writes, “Love for neighbor was the epitome of Old Testament ethics (see Matt. 22:39-40), but Jesus deepens that in a startling way. We are to love our neighbors even when they are hostile and do evil acts against us. Love for enemies, moreover, is not restricted to feelings of benevolence but meant to be shown in acts of kindness. The model for this difficult activity is nothing less than God himself, our Father. Like obedient children we must emulate our Father and act toward evil people as he does. If God can be merciful to wicked as well as good people, so must we” (*Matthew*, ZECNT, 214). We will walk through our text making four overarching observations on what is, without question, one of the most difficult commands in all of the Bible to obey. Honesty here is at a premium. To truly love my enemy and persecutor is not human. It really is divine. Martin Luther King, Jr. was on to something when he said, “Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.”

I. Loving our enemies shows others that God is our Father 5:43-44

Once again Jesus used the phrase, “You have heard that it was said.” What He is about to say has been passed down by the scribes of old (v. 21, 33). This is their take and interpretation on the inspired text. The passage cited is Leviticus 19:18, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” The phrase “as yourself”

interestingly is omitted. Quarles points out, “This subtle revision transformed a command about *how* God’s people are to love into a command on *whom* they are to love” (158). But, it gets worse. The scribes added to the biblical revelation the words, “and hate your enemy.” You will search in vain to find these words anywhere in the Old Testament. The scribes made an interpretive step and drew a faulty conclusion. To love your neighbor has the natural corollary of hating your enemy. What could be more logical? What could be more unlike God? Spurgeon is right, “In this case a command of Scripture had a human antithesis fitted on to it by depraved minds; and this human addition was mischievous....This is a sad crime against the Word of the Lord” (Matthew, 52). To counter their error Jesus provided a startling two-fold corrective.

1) Love them 5:44

Jesus “hates the parasitical growth” of hate your enemy (Spurgeon, 52).

Once more He counters the faulty hermeneutic of the scribes and Pharisees with the phrase, “But I tell you.” Then comes the real shocker: “love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” Love is a verb, an action word. It is also a present imperative, a word of command calling for a continuous action. We are not to love our neighbors periodically or every once in a while. We are to love them constantly and consistently. We are to

give ourselves up and give ourselves away for the good of those who oppose, hate and even persecute us. We are to respond with a 1Corinthians 13 kind of response. Jesus, in essence, transforms our enemies into neighbors, something the Word of God always intended. Perhaps no story in the Bible illustrates this better than the story of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:25-37. The Samaritan did not hate and ignore the need of the beaten Jewish man. He loved Him and demonstrated that love by serving him. No wonder we rightly see the Good Samaritan as a type and picture of our Lord Jesus loving us!

2) Pray for them 5:44

Jesus extends our response a step further. Not only do we love our enemies, we should also pray them. The word “pray” is also a present imperative, a word of command calling for a habitual action. Praying for them puts them before the throne of God who is our Father. It commits their welfare to Him who knows all things and sees all things. This is especially necessary when it comes to praying for those “who persecute you” (cf. 5:11-12). You are opposed and “persecuted” (also a present tense verb) for following Christ. How do I respond? I love them anyway. I am mistreated, perhaps even harmed by my enemies. How do I respond? I pray for them. The parallel account in Luke 6:27-28 drives this home, “But I say to you who hear, Love

your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.” Paul’s words in Romans 12:14 provide an added reinforcement, “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse (see also Rom. 12:20-21).

It has been well said that Jesus’ life is the best commentary on His words. Never is that more true than when it comes to loving your enemies and praying for those who persecute you. In Luke 23:34, as he hung on the cross and was persecuted and mocked by the sinners He came to save, our Lord loved and prayed for His enemies saying, “Father, forgive them, because they do not know what they are doing.”

Stephen did the same thing for his enemies in Acts 7:59-60 as they stoned him to death. Citizens of this world find all of this to be foolish and nonsense. Citizens of the Kingdom of King Jesus find it to be the normal and supernatural thing to do. After all, we are simply following in the footsteps of our Father. We are simply following the example of Jesus.

II. Loving others without discrimination is to act like God our Father 5:45

Loving your enemies does not make you a child of God. Loving your enemies shows you are a child of God. As John Piper puts it,

“Now someone might take [“so that you may sons of your Father who is in heaven”] to mean that you must first become a person who loves his enemies

before you can be a child of God. But it may also mean: love your enemies and so prove yourself to be what you are –a child of God. That is, show you are a child of God by acting the way your Father acts. If you are his, then his character is in you, and you will be inclined to do what he does. God love his enemies—the evil and the unrighteous—in sending rain and sunshine on them instead of instant judgment” (“But I Say to You, Love Your Enemies, Part 1,” 5-14-95).

God does not send instant judgment “on the evil.” He sends His blessings.

Two examples are given.

1) God gives sunlight to all

The examples of sun and rain are aspects of both natural revelation and common grace. God reveals Himself as loving and benevolent to all of humanity, a humanity that bears His image. He is indiscriminate in His love as He causes the sun to rise (the Bible’s typical use of “phenomenological language,” the language of appearance) day after day on both evil people and good people. He blesses those who hate Him (“the evil”) and those who love Him (“the good”).

And note, it is “His sun.” All of creation is His. The sun, stars and planets belong to their Creator to do His bidding. Part of their assignment is to bless humanity, both good and evil!

2) God gives rain to all

The people of God knew that He sent the rain. It was a regular reminder of his grace and kindness, and of their absolute dependence on God to provide what they needed simply to live. The evil and good are now described with the parallel phrase just and unjust. Our Father loves and cares for them all, each and everyone. They all get the light of the sun and the nourishment of rain. When we love our “enemies;” those who have now been redefined as our “neighbor,” we are simply acting like our heavenly Father. Sinclair Ferguson provides helpful clarity and perspective on all this when he says,

“Can we really love those who have been hostile to us? Not as long as we live by the principles of the kingdoms of this world, which at best encourage us to ignore our enemies, and at worst to retaliate against them. Only the Kingdom of God can provide sufficiently strong motives to help us love our enemies: your Father shows love to his enemies every day in giving the sun and the rain to the righteous and the ungodly alike. He has every right to retaliate against sinners for the dishonor they have done to his creation. Instead, he shows mercy and patience. We are

to do the same. Like Father, like son!” (*The Sermon on the Mount*, 103).

III. Loving others without discrimination sets up apart from the those who do not know God as Father 5:46-47

Citizens of the Kingdom of God live distinctively different lives as they put on display the character of their heavenly Father, as they live as salt in an impure world and light in a darkened world. To love only those who love you in return is nothing more than “self-serving pragmatism” (Quarles, 166). Even lost pagans do that. Virtually everyone does it. We must not lower ourselves and be like everyone else. You are a new creation in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17). You now live in a new kind of way. You now love in a new kind of way. Jesus once again puts two examples before us for our careful consideration. After all, “if you love those how love you, what reward do you have?” Eschatological judgment will not be a happy place for such persons.

1) Illustration of the tax collector 5:46

Tax collectors were despised and hated in Jesus’ day. They were viewed as traitors to their own people in their service to Rome. Many were virtual thieves with their manipulation of tax rates for personal gain. “Licensed robbers” was how the common Hebrew person saw the. A righteous, law abiding, and faithful Jew believed he had nothing in common with these

infamous rouses. Jesus said, “Not so quick!” Even tax collectors have and enjoy friends—other tax collectors for example! How are you any different from them if you only love people who love you? No doubt this example would have stunned our Lord’s Jewish audience. It probably made them mad as a hornet! However, our Lord is not finished. He will inflame their anger even further with His second illustration.

2) Illustration of the pagan 5:47

Jewish hatred for Gentiles often rivaled their hatred of tax collectors. MacArthur notes, “Gentiles were outside the pale of God’s mercy and concern, fit only for destruction as His enemies and the enemies of those who taught they were His people” (Matthew 1-7, 349). I could just imagine how a Hebrew viewed a “Gentile tax collector!” Hate upon hate no doubt.

Greetings in the ancient world usually expressed some kind of blessing. It was like our greeting “good day” but more. As a result, some Jews would never greet a Gentile and some Gentiles would never greet a Jew (Quarles, 167). They would only greet their friends, those like them, those Jesus refers to as “your brothers.” Jesus says there is absolutely nothing remarkable about this. Nothing! You’re more like a lost Gentile than a loving God. Your behavior is “more pagan than divine” (Quarles, 188).

There is nothing really different about you at all. There is no evidence you belong to the kingdom of God (v. 3), that you are a child of God (v. 8), that you have a righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees and will get you into heaven (v. 20). How we treat our enemies says a lot about us. It may even indicate where we are headed when we die.

IV. Loving our enemies conforms us to the likeness of God our Father 5:48

A number of times in the Bible we are told, “God is...” These declarations reveal to us something about the nature and character of God. For example, we find the following affirmations in Scripture:

“God is holy” (Levt. 11:44, 19:2; 1 Pet. 1:16)

“God is Spirit” (John 4:24)

“God is a consuming fire, a jealous God” (Deut. 4:24; Heb. 12:29)

“God is love” (1 John 4:8, 16)

“God is true” (1 John 5:20)

Jesus adds to these marvelous statements another one concerning who our God is in verse 48: “Your heavenly Father is perfect.” The immediate context is how we love our enemies. Quarles notes, “Love for others, including one’s enemies, is the essence of divine perfection and the key to true righteousness” (169). Let’s take a closer look at exactly what is before us here.

1) The goal

God's expectation is clear even if, in our own efforts, it is utterly impossible. We "must be perfect." In the greater context of the Sermon on the Mount the idea of moral purity and practice also is before us. We are to reflect the character of the God whose Kingdom we now belong. Note that the tense of the verb is future. This is where we are headed in our future glorification. Who and what we will be some day in eternity should impact how we love and conduct ourselves today. We are to be what we are becoming! We pursue the ideal with the full confidence and conviction that we will arrive there. First John 3:2-3 puts it perfectly: "Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure." Because we have the hope, a certain hope, that we will be like Him, we pursue purity as He is pure. We pursue perfection as he is perfect.

2) The pattern

In 1 John 3:2-3 the pattern is Christ. In Matthew 5:48 the pattern is our heavenly Father. There is no difference! Like Father like son! Like Savior like disciple. This is the pattern Scripture sets before us. Paul understood this truth and extended it in the process of discipleship in 1

Corinthians 11:1 when he writes, “Imitate me, as I also imitate Christ. Again, the immediate context in our text is how we love our enemies. The greater context is the Sermon on the Mount itself. I love how Spurgeon puts it, “What a mark is set before us by our Perfect King, who, speaking from his mountain-throne, saith, ‘*Be ye perfect, even as your Father which is in heave is perfect*’! Lord, give what thou dost command; then both the grace and the glory will be thine alone” (*Matthew*, 54).

Conclusion

Loving our enemies is to treat others like Jesus has treated us. As Paul says in Romans 5:8, “While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” Loving our enemies is to treat others like the Father has treated us. Paul adds in Romans 5:10, “while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son.” My friend Andy Davis says, when we love our enemies, “we will imitate our heavenly Father and grow towards the perfection that salvation in Christ will eventually complete in us (Matt. 5:48)” [*Revitalize*, 98]. Andy then wisely, and correctly I believe, connects loving our enemies to humility and provides ten good reasons we should be humble towards our opponents. There is excellent food for thought here as we conclude this study.

Why Be Humble toward Opponents? Ten Good Reasons

- 1) Because God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble (1 Pet. 5:5).
- 2) Because we are sinners too (1 Cor. 4:7).
- 3) Because God is motivated to fight for those who do not fight for themselves (1 Pet. 2:23)
- 4) Because Paul was willing to trade his salvation to rescue his enemies (Rom. 9:1-4).
- 5) You cannot tell the wheat from the weeds (Matt. 13:29).
- 6) You are not the issue; God's glory is (1 Cor. 10:31).
- 7) A humble response to attacks will motivate church members to join you (Rom. 12:9-21).
- 8) Your enemies may be right...about something (Ps. 139:23-24).
- 9) Humility will adorn the gospel for outsiders to see (Matt. 5:16).
- 10) Suffering well grows you in Christlikeness (Rom. 5:3).

Practical Advice

- 1) Make it a point to obey Jesus's command to pray for those who oppose and insult you. Pray for them by name.
- 2) Bring all criticisms back to God in prayer. Where you are convicted that you have wronged someone, be humble enough to go back to that person and seek forgiveness.
- 3) Practice good listening skills with people who disagree with you.
- 4) Ask the Lord in prayer to give you a discerning heart to know when to fight like a lion and when to be humble and yielding.
- 5) Get prepared for potentially contentious meetings, especially before the whole church (like in church conferences), by praying in great detail about what

you're about to face, putting on the spiritual armor Paul lists in Ephesians 6:10-17, and by reading many Scripture verses on humility.

- 6) Be especially wary of gossip and slander when gathered with passionate supporters of your efforts... Understand how sinful it is to act as though you could never commit the same sin as others.
- 7) Ponder the example of the Pharisee and the tax collector in Jesus's parable of humble prayer (Luke 18:9-14).
- 8) Understand that some opponents really are children of the devil and will never be reconciled to biblical doctrine. But also know that some of the bitterest enemies right now could become staunch allies later.
- 9) Be very wary of lawsuits. Read Paul's prohibition passage in 1 Corinthians 6:1-8 and submit to God's wisdom.
- 10) As you proceed in the Christian life, be more and more zealous for Christ's glory than for your good reputation among others.

(Slightly adapted from *Revitalize*, 98-103)